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ABSTRACT

To see literature as a sign and a symbol simply reasserts the view of the humanities as the embodiment of the highest aspirations of human nature. Human beings are sign givers and symbol makers as they look for the sacred meaning in their lives. Through a college humanities course, some of the symbols that artists employ in fiction, poetry, drama, and film are explored to find the significance of their sacred reality. The example used in this paper to illustrate literature and symbolism is James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Sonny is compared to a modern biblical Isaiah, a suffering servant who finds spiritual expiation through his music. Because the story portrays a relationship between this world and another, students have a witness to a truth about human nature and the role of the humanities. A syllabus for a college humanities course entitled "The Sacred and the Profane: The Human Search for the Spiritual in Fiction, Drama, Film, Poetry, and Painting" is included. (DJC)

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SACRED SOUNDS IN THE HUMANITIES

by

Robert A. Kelly

Paper Presented to Georgia Association of Junior Colleges
October 23, 1987

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Paper Presented to
Georgia Assiciation of Junior Colleges
October 23, 1987
"Sacred Sounds in the Humanities"

I teach a humanities course based on a premise familiar in Western civilization, and a premise concisely stated by British poet and critic David Jones.

> Man is a creature which, from its earliest known beginnings, has consistently shown a duality of behavior. On the one hand it has occupied itself, as have innumerable other creatures, with astonishing ingenuities directed towards quite obvious and practical ends. On the other hand, unlike other creatures, it has been equally occupied with activities which are far from having an obvious end. But all acts must be directed towards some end. And the only end that suggests itelf is that these activities are done for a sign. They are significant of something other. We feel justified in calling this creature man not only the supreme utilist but the only extra-utilist, or sacramentalist.[1]

This observation indicates that human beings are sign givers and symbol makers, creatures on the lookout for the sacred meaning in their lives. And Jones's comment about the human condition clearly suggests that the artist must provide a means through which human beings express significance. My humanities course explores some of the symbols that artists employ in poetry, fiction, drama, and film to signify sacred reality.

While the Bible, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, and Milton may all provide us with many significant, unambiguous images

and signs of spiritual reality, contemporary art vexes the audience in search of sacred signs and images.

One way that we proceed in the class is to discuss how a 20th-Century writer, James Baldwin, employs music imagery to signify the sacred in his short story, "Sonny's Blues."

The story concerns a young black man, Sonny, who attempts to overcome a drug addiction and become a successful jazz musician. In addition to his personal struggle, Sonny must make his sometimes dense and uncompassionate older brother, the narrator in the story, understand why life is filled with struggle. This lack of understanding between the brothers surfaces early in the story when Sonny and the narrator discuss what Sonny wants to do when he grows up. When Sonny reveals that he wants to become a bebop jazz musician in the mold of Charlie Parker, the narrator confesses his general ignorance about jazz: he says, "I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called 'good-time people'."[2] And the narrator is totally unaware of the improvisational, creative nature of bebop jazz.

The difference between Louis Armstrong's music and Charlie Parker's is the difference between an emerging art and an established one. Armstrong's music, the dixieland sound of the 20's, was energetically melodic: it evolved from this ragtime, ragtag sound in the twenties into the big band,

swing music of Goodman, Shaw, Hampton and others in the 1930's. By the time that Sonny hears jazz in the Harlem nightclubs, it had become convoluted and highly personal music better suited to the small club rather than to the dance hall, and better played by a small group of interactive performers than by a big band.

To illustrate the difference between the jazz of Louis Armstrong and that of Charlie Parker, I play the students a rendition of a 20's standard, "Embraceable You," and then let them hear a version of the same song by Parker. While Parker's version of the song seems to use the melody only as a departure point, the careful listener recognizes that the bop version uses the standard tune as the base for the improvisational play. Of course, Sonny's penchant for bebop, for the expressive, and improvisational style of play is a desire to play like Parker and the beboppers who sometimes sounded cacophonous, but who created their sound within the well-established chord changes and melodies of traditional ballads and dixieland tunes. Bop relied on the audience to recognize the artist's innovative technique: if the audience failed to listen carefully, then the music could sound wildly self-indulgent.

When Sonny plays a bop version of "Am I Blue" in the final scene of the story, the narrator perceives for the first time the importance of music to Sonny: the narrator sees that Sonny is reaching out to the audience, showing them

through his playing how they can "cease lamenting" (p. 346) over their suffering. Most importantly, the narrator understands why his brother needs to play music. As the narrator says, "I understood, at last, that he [Sonny] could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (p. 346).

The narrator recognizes Sonny's cathartic effort to seek freedom from pain through music by toasting Sonny with a drink of a scotch and milk which, the narrator notes, "glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (p. 347). The conclusion of the story, couched as it is in the biblical allusion to Isaiah, reveals fully the meaning of Sonny's playing the blues by indicating the spiritual significance of his playing. The narrator likens Sonny to the Israelites who are told by Isaiah (51: 17, 22-23) that their sufferings will pass if they keep faith in God. Sonny is a modern Isaiah, a suffering servant who finds spiritual expiation through his music. And Sonny's music, as the narrator reminds us, helps others to see the way to salvation .

The story employs music and the Bible in order to suggest significances. Because the story shows a relationship between this world and another, I find that the students have a witness in Sonny's story to a truth about human nature and the role of the humanities. Literature and music are temporal, immediate experiences for an audience, but the

artist and the audience take this experience beyond the moment into a timeless realm.

To see literature as a sign and symbol simply reasserts the view of the humanities as the embodiment of the highest aspirations of human nature. And when we offer humanities courses we are, after all, asking students to explore with us the most profound questions about human existence, including the question of how human experience participates in spiritual reality.

Certainly, Baldwin is one artist who invites his readers to enter a fictional world in order to gain access to a spiritual one. His story is read in the moment, but its significance, along with the significance of the other works studied in my humanities course, is experienced in an eternal present. Art of whatever time and whatever form ultimately must affirm this timeless moment when a human being signifies the wholeness of fragmented experience.

NOTES

1

David Jones. "Use and Sign." The Antigonish Review. Number 68 (Winter 1987), p. 103.

2

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," The Heath Guide to Literature, 2nd Ed. Ed. David Bergman and Daniel Mark Epstein (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1987), p. 334. All subsequent references are to this text.

file

HUMANITIES 200
SPRING 1987
DR. ROBERT KELLY

Title: Humanities 200--The Sacred and the Profane: The human search for the spiritual in fiction, drama, film, poetry, and painting

Week 1
April 7
Introduction
Slides
The Bible: A Literary Heritage

Week 2
April 14
Readings in the Bible
The Book of Job
J.B.
God's Favorite(videotape)

Week 3
April 21
Paper 1 (in-class essay)
Readings in poetry

Week 4
April 28
Readings in poetry(continued)
The Scarlet Letter
Mid-term test

MAY 4, 1987 IS MID-TERM

Week 5
May 5
Billy Budd (videotape)
Conferences in preparation for oral report

Week 6
May 12
The Crucible
The Colours of Passion (film on Marc Chagall, painter)
Briesheag Revisited

Week 7
May 19
"Sonny's Blues"
Go Tell It On The Mountain (videotape)

Week 8
May 26
Surfacing

Paper 2 (in-class essay)

Week 9
June 2
Oral reports
Preparation for final examination

Week 10
June 8-4
Final Examination

Assignments:

In-class essays-------20%
mid-term test---------20%
oral report-----------30%
final exam------------30%

Attendance policy: If you miss two class meetings, you will likely fail the course. See complete statement about attendance policy in College Catalog.